

Cuckoo Nest

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/41833446) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/41833446>.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Dream SMP
Characters:	Sally the Salmon (Dream SMP) , Alexis Quackity , Charlie Dagleish Slimecicle , Kristin Rosales Watson , Wilbur is here but appears like once
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Medieval , Hurt/Comfort , Angst , Ambiguous/Open Ending , Prequel , Morally Ambiguous Character , Siblings , Dysfunctional Family , Canon Backstory , Author Is Sleep Deprived , Wilbur Soot's Significant Other is Named Sally the Salmon , Sally the Salmon is Not a Fish (Dream SMP) , Child Abuse , Implied/Referenced Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism , Mentions of blood and injuries , Shapeshifting
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of The curse of being young
Collections:	Fanfics I'd eat again at 3 am and already have
Stats:	Published: 2022-09-20 Words: 6,433 Chapters: 1/1

Cuckoo Nest

by [SilentTeyz](#)

Summary

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Miracles didn't stop at that. The Empress lifted up the edge of her veil to reach for something underneath it. Sally caught a glimpse of Kristin's light skin and plum lips before it fell again and a pair earrings was offered to them on an open palm – one tear-shaped diamond per sister.

"Look after one another," said the Empress, not unkindly, before she turned away and left, surrounded by a crowd of armored guards.

People parted in her path in awe; she seemed to be drifting rather than walking, and the sun itself formed a soft golden halo above her head. Sally could still feel the touch of fingers on her cheek, as if the warmth was permanently etched in a scattering of her ginger freckles.

I want to be like her, both sisters had thought at that moment, but each for reasons of their own.

Prequel to Butterfly Reign: the history of br!Sally, her sister, and more.

Notes

This was written as a gift work to Cherr for winning the 3rd place in my discord server's anniversary contest. I

It was a challenging topic to write, but I liked it very much as it gave me a chance to explore more character backstories.

Enjoy reading!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Sally was at war.

All the neighborhood kids fought; no one knew exactly how it started, only that the winner was the one who carried the flag through half the town without getting caught by the others. The task seemed simple enough, but in fact Sally had to rush through the crowded streets while about fifty kids were trying to grab at her hands or hair. Most of them were older than the seven-year-old girl and noticeably larger, but that was also to her advantage: quick, nimble, she maneuvered between the crowds and ducked out of the way each time than any of her pursuers came close. Let them shout and shake their fists all they wanted; nobody could catch up to her.

Sally's heart was beating fast, thump thump *thump*. Her cheeks blushed bright pink, her eyes lighting up with the thrill of the chase. She could feel someone coming closer, here he was reaching for the flag clutched in her hand, a shriek of triumph burst from his lips—

Sally ducked under the counter and the boy chasing her flew into a basket of fish guts. More noise erupted behind her: indignant shouts, a broom landing on the head of the unfortunate pursuer. Sally giggled, but forced herself to look ahead. She couldn't afford to be distracted when the sweet victory was flickering right in front of her nose.

A large black building loomed up ahead. No one could remember what its original purpose had been; after a fire around thirty years ago, only half the walls and burnt beams remained of it, covered in a thick layer of gray ash. To be accepted into the local kid gang, you had to spend the night alone under its roof and not run away in fear when groans and long howls echoed through in the darkness. Sally's honorable task was to leap out from around the corner, screaming, and scare the newcomers with her soot-smudged face. That was how her nickname, Sally Soot, stuck. Today she intended to add the title of a winner to it.

She dashed under the archway entrance and leaped up into a pile of abandoned wooden crates. From there she reached the wall, covered with thick vines, and gave it a good tug on one of the branches. Some of the children rolled in after it and froze as they saw Sally climbing up onto the ceiling beams.

"You'll fall, silly!" someone shouted.

Sally laughed, wiping sweaty red curls out of her face.

"Try to get me now, cowards!" she exclaimed, opening her arms like bird wings and balancing frailly on a half-rotten block of wood. Every loud creak made her heart skip a beat, yet she smiled all the wider, glaring at the boys stomping around the entrance.

When she reached the middle of the beam, she crouched down and dangled her feet down. The flag, three crosses smeared on a piece of old tablecloth, was hung solemnly from a rusty nail.

"Okay, you win," one of the older boys agreed in a trembling voice. "Now get down before somebody sees you!"

Sally had to grudgingly agree. If Lyssa knew where she was now, her sister would scold her to deafness and lock her in the cellar for the rest of her shift at the tavern. Brushing the dust off her patched skirt, Sally tried to get up. It was a big mistake, because in that instant the crackling rose to crescendo and the world fell out from under her feet.

Someone's scream cut through the rumble of breaking wood. A cloud of dust, soot, and splinters surged through the air and filled her lungs. Sally came to awareness already on the floor, coughing her lungs out. She tried to move, and a bolt of pain ran down her left leg, so strong that tears spurted from her eyes.

She wasn't sure how long it took before someone's voice pierced through the noise ringing in her ears. Sally hid her face in her palms and tried to hold back the sobs as best she could, but wet streaks ran down her cheeks and the sound of her crying echoed treacherously in the prevailing silence.

"Your Imperial Majesty, it's dangerous-!" someone exclaimed, and the pile of wood shifted under the weight of another person. Sally lifted her head and, through a hazy curtain of tears, saw a woman crouching in front of her.

Her face was invisible through the thick black veil hanging from her broad-brimmed hat. She had to be a fairy, surely; there were simply no such people in their land, not even nobles, who could dress in beautiful dresses of purple silk, covered with a starry scattering of jewels. For a moment Sally was so dumbfounded that she did not notice a warm hand gently wiping her tear-stained cheek.

"Hello," the woman said. "My name is Kristin. May I lift you up?"

Sally nodded hesitantly. Kristin slipped one hand under her shoulder blades and the other just below her bent knees. The disturbed ankle – broken, no less, or at least dislocated – erupted in a new wave of pain, and Sally involuntarily wrapped her arms around the woman's neck.

Picking up and carrying her didn't seem to be much trouble for the woman – Sally was small for her age, even with certain childish chubbiness resembling more of a thin twig. The dust finally settled, and glancing timidly out from where she hid her face in Kristin's dark brown curls, Sally saw people gathering around them.

"Empress," someone whispered reverently, and within seconds that word alone was buzzing on everyone's lips. Sally furrowed her eyebrows and swiveled her head around: Where was the Empress? How could she be here, in a forgotten coastal town so far from the capital?

"Sally, what have you done now?" a figure came running out of the crowd, the familiar furious voice making the girl cringe. Now she was definitely in trouble, and the excuse of 'nothing happened anyway!' wasn't going to slide this time.

But then Lyssa spotted Kristin; out of nowhere, two men in armor pointed their swords at her. Her sister froze in place and dropped to her knees. The rest of the crowd followed.

Sally thought she finally knew where the Empress was.

The girl fidgeted in the woman's arms and reached for Lyssa. Upon noticing this, the Empress' gaze softened; she stepped closer, rustling her silk skirts, stopping right in front of the trembling girl.

"Stand up," she said. Lyssa rose to her feet, wringing her hands together.

"Are you sisters?" Both girls nodded in unison. "Do you have parents? Other relatives?"

"N-no, Your Imperial Majesty," Lyssa stammered out. "It's just us."

Kristin was silent for some time. Then Sally felt herself being lowered carefully. Planting her unharmed leg down, Sally shifted her weight into her sister's awaiting embrace.

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"We're not in L'manburg anymore, Sally," Lyssa hissed, fixing her hair in a small hand mirror for the twentieth time. "This is the baron's manor. You have to *behave*."

In response Sally snapped her teeth at Lyssa as if to bite her, and stuck her tongue out of a loop-sided grin when her sister startled away.

Ever since the day that they met the Empress, Lyssa hadn't been behaving the same. She sold her earring and used part of the money a new cotton dress. It was pretty, but the fabric stained and torn too easily to Sally's liking. How was Lyssa supposed to hop into puddles after the rain with such a long hem, or climb roofs, or pet the kittens they've been feeding up near the dumpster?

Apparently Lyssa didn't want to do any of those things. A couple of weeks after Kristin's visit to L'manburg, the Mallard Baron – a nickname that was given him by the townsfolk because of the duck sigil – had married a noble lady from afar. When they were searching for more maids for the new Baroness, Lissa managed to stand out and get picked.

They were given a room in the servant quarters – it was tiny, barely enough for Sally to lay across the floor but it had a *bed* in it, with pillows and sheets and everything – some new

clothes, and a chance to wash themselves in a real bathhouse. Lyssa was thrilled, but Sally came out of it as happy as a wet cat.

She didn't like it here in the manor. People were unusually mean, and it quickly resolved to yelling and battering whenever somebody caught Sally where she wasn't supposed to be. Fighting back was in her spitfire nature, but apparently that wasn't allowed either, if the lecture that Lyssa was giving her was anything to judge by.

It had only been a week this far, but Sally already missed her old friends. She wanted to go back to their endless games and freedom to roam around without someone telling her where she can or cannot go. She tried to tell Lyssa that they should leave, but her sister was hearing none of it. Lyssa was obsessed with the idea of becoming a lady, and thought that earning the baroness' favor would get the woman to make her into one.

"You're as much of a lady as I am a salmon," Sally declared. She was twirling an earring in her fingers; it flashed with all sorts of pretty colors when bared to sunlight. Sally had bitten her sister when she wanted to sell it. The earring was her little treasure, her lucky charm, and she wouldn't allow anybody to take it away.

Shoving the diamond underneath her shirt, Sally grabbed a bottle of perfume from the table and sniffed it experimentally.

"Ew, you gonna put that on yourself?" she grimaced. "I think you'd better kiss a fish."

Lyssa smacked her with the hair brush and took the bottle away. "What would a little savage like you know of beauty?" she pursed her lips, nose scrounged and face growing red in a way that told Sally that she was one word away from blowing up.

"Don't frown so much, you'll get wrinkles," Sally advised. A second after a pillow was thrown into her face. Sally saw it as a declaration of war and grabbed a pillow of her own.

Five minutes later they were both lying on the floor, stomachs hurting from laughter, geese feathers drifting in the air. This was Sally's sister: Lyssa that had been taking care of her for as long as she remembered, Lyssa who tamed her unruly curls into braids and strummed cords on her guitar on nights when both of them were too hungry to speak.

After she caught her breath, Lyssa picked up the perfume bottle like she was considering spraying some, but then changed her mind and let it roll under the bed.

"Sally," Lyssa called in her 'I am about to talk all grown-up and serious' tone. "Look at me."

Sally rolled onto her face, growling something in between a protest and an affirmation when Lyssa's hand settled at the back of her neck.

"I'm trying to do what's the best for us both, and all I ask of you is to stay out of trouble. Can you do that for me, fry?"

Sally lifted up her chin, looking in her sister's face.

"Does this place make you happy?" she asked.

"It does," Lyssa nodded. "It really, really does."

Sally thought of it for a moment. "Then I can try," she grumbled.

Turned out that the servants' children were not much different from town kids. Sally got along with them well enough, and even became sort of an authority after promptly smacking the local bully with a piece of stale bread. Through the day they would chase pigeons in the courtyard and battle with sticks; one time they mixed laundry water and some ink to overturn on a butler who wronged them the other day. All children kept silent as they were questioned, none betraying the instigators even when they were threatened with flogging. Sally taught them the spirit of unity, and for that, she was proud.

There was one thing that had been nagging her, though – a boy, around her age, that she sometimes saw around the manor, watching them playing from behind a window or a stone statue. Sally thought he was just too shy to ask to join, but one time that they had run into him in a walnut grove, the older kids simply shoved him out of the way. The boy flew straight into mud, rolled over and snarled at Sally when she tried to help him to his feet, holding himself by all means like a wounded animal.

"That's the baron's bastard," a girl told Sally when the boy disappeared out of sight. "Don't talk to him unless you want to anger the sirs," she added, not knowing of the thoughts already brewing in Sally's head at that moment.

In truth there was nothing that would oblige her to interfere. The boy was a stranger to her; she knew that helping someone in his situation may prove to be more trouble than it was worth. But Sally couldn't close her eyes without imagining Kristin's face – barely a silhouette simmering through a black veil – and remembering the lost expression in the boy's eyes.

She found the boy the next day, hiding in an old fountain. There was no water inside, only overgrown plants, and the bastard sat with his back propped up against a piece of cracked marble. A snake curled up in his palms, tilting its head up when it saw Sally coming.

"Hey."

The boy screeched and spun around, dropping the snake. Sally rocked back and forth on her heels, waiting for him to calm down and at the same time using that moment to get a closer look at her new acquaintance.

Sally didn't like the Mallard Baron. His face was always red and he smelled too much like the cheap ale they poured in the tavern Lyssa used to work at. The baron's bastard looked nothing like him, however: his hair was dark as opposed to his father's blond, and his skin was a tone lighter, but they had the same eyes: small, black and angry.

"Don't come any closer, or Charlie will bite you," the boy warned.

Sally assumed that Charlie was the viper that was currently coiling at his feet. Two drops of emerald eyes watched her every move closely, but it didn't seem to be aggressive, just curious.

"I'm not afraid of a tiny snake." Sally picked up a stick and jutted it out in Charlie's direction. The viper slithered out its tongue, made an almost questioning sound and eventually coiled around the stick comfortably.

"Traitor," the boy breathed out.

One hand resting on her hip, lifting up the snake like a torchlight, Sally jerked her chin up at the boy with a fire of challenge in the bright teal gaze.

"I'm Sally," she said. "Sally Soot."

"I don't care," the boy hissed.

"You know, when someone introduces themselves, you're supposed to give your name back. Even I know it, Ducky, and I wasn't raised in a manor."

"Don't call me that," the boy said, clenching his fists, gritting his teeth together so hard that his cheeks sunken in. "I have a name."

"Well?" Sally prompted.

The boy visibly deflated. He looked down at his feet, shuffling his toe around.

"It's Alexis," he mumbled.

"Alright, *Ducky*," Sally grinned, shoving him in the shoulder. "Come on now, we're going to play tag."

Lyssa warned Sally against ever appearing in front of the Baron or the Baroness, and for an entire she was more than happy to follow that command—well, until the day that she heard the music.

Sally had seen people playing flute and handdrums before; there was Lyssa strumming on her old, well-loved guitar, but none of them filled the air with magic like the melody coming from an open window. It was days that stretched without an end, time blurring into ripples on a shimmering lake and autumn days counted by rises and falls of a round silver moon... Sally was hypnotized, and before she knew it, she was peeking up inside the window.

The young Baroness was sitting in front of what looked like an odd-shaped black table, her eyes almost closed, eyelashes fluttering like she was seeing a very pleasant dream. Sally dived back down, afraid that she had been spotted, but when a minute after nothing happened she was bold enough to cast another curious look. However the strange not-really-a-table worked, the music seemed to be coming from it.

Next day Sally had come to listen to it again. And the day after, and the day after *after*, and every single day from there on. The music could sound playful and cheery, sad or longing; at times the Baroness played so loudly, so furiously, that it would drown out the drunk laughter of the Baron's guests piled around a single table and towers of strange-looking coins.

One morning Sally snuck up habitually under the window, a guitar in her arms. Lyssa and a few other maids were called to accompany the Baroness on a carriage ride and she hadn't saw anything harmful in borrowing the instrument for a couple of hours. Lyssa would never allow Sally to touch it otherwise, as if she was a small child that could break it on accident, and she really *really* wanted to make beautiful music like the Baroness.

Only the guitar sounded all *wrong*. The strings felt like they were cutting Sally's fingers. It wasn't enough to break the skin, but it hurt when a string snapped and whipped her hand.

Sally bit on her thumb with a frustrated growl and tossed the guitar into grass. Her eyes fell on the instrument standing in the middle of the empty room. It'd be hours before either Baroness or Lyssa came back... Plenty of time to look at the magic music-making table *and* put her sister's guitar back into its place. What was that, if not a silent invitation to take a risk?

Sally climbed through the window frame. She looked around, and when she was sure that nobody was coming to check out the noise, scurried up to a high bench in front of the instrument. A line of rectangle-shaped buttons was layered before her, some long and white and the other black and short. Sally pressed one experimentally with the tip of her index finger, and it made a crystal-clear, melodic sound.

Clapping her hands in excitement, Sally tried the other buttons too. Some of them were high-pitched like lark songs, turning into a low sort of hum as her hand traveled further to the left. The Baroness played a lot of different songs in the last months, but one of them so often that it was ingrained into Sally's memory. She kept pressing and trying until she found the button that sounded just *right*.

It was a puzzle of sorts. Trying to connect the right pieces together to make a whole picture, except all the pieces were made just of sounds. Sally was impatient; her music was nowhere near as fast or beautiful as the Baroness's, but mistakes forced her to try over and over again until she could play a small fraction perfectly without a stutter.

She was so preoccupied that she didn't notice neither the passage of time nor the fact that she wasn't alone in the room anymore, until a hand settled on her shoulder, grasping it in a bone-cracking grip.

"Who taught you to play that, child?" The Baroness was staring her down with cold fire in amethyst eyes.

Sally shrank into herself. "You," she said, feeling meek, yet refusing to cower from the amethyst fire of the Baroness's eyes.

Something changed in the woman's expression. Sally felt the grip on her shoulder loosen. The Baroness grasped her hand instead, turning it all around and giving her long fingers a close, inspecting look. Sally didn't know what could be so interesting in the chapped skin or the dirt darkening underneath her nails, but whatever it was, it made the Baroness hum and nod to herself.

"I don't tolerate lies and foolery, but I can recognize a talent when I hear one," the Baroness said. "If you promise to be a diligent student and obey me in everything, I will teach you everything I know. I will make you into a creator of music." She straightened up into her full imposing height. "Decide fast, because I'm not going to make such an offer a second time."

Sally wrung her hands together and worried her lip, but there was nothing much to decide: from the moment that she first touched the instrument, she knew that her heart had fully and hopelessly belonged to music.

Sally spent the rest of the day with the Baroness. She explained a little more about the instrument – that it was called the piano and that the strange buttons were keys, what notes and music sheets were for – and then they had an evening tea out in the gardens. The Baroness had her swap her normal woolen clothes for a fancy-looking blue dress; it was all itchy and uncomfortable, and other ladies stared at Sally as if she were an exotic animal, despite the numerous compliments coming from all sides. Sally discovered that her eyes were large and pretty, that her habit to sneeze loudly was childishly adorable, and that overall she was a lovely child for being born a commoner – whatever *that* meant. Even the servants acted polite and friendly as opposed to their usual sneers, and the pretentiousness of it all made Sally want to puke.

Sally ran to Lyssa as soon as she was able to, bringing the guitar that she had left hidden behind in the gardens. Only it seemed that sister already knew the news, and she wasn't happy at all.

"You never listen to me, do you?" she said, pacing around the room. It was worded like a question, but didn't sound like one.

Sally's eyes stayed trained on her feet. Lyssa could get scary when she was angry – truly angry, like now – and she found that waiting it out was usually the best way to avoid a disaster.

Unfortunately for herself, Sally didn't know when to shut up.

"You never listen to me either," she mumbled.

Lyssa stopped and looked at her sharply. The guitar was torn out of Sally's hands, so suddenly that it sliced her fingers down to blood.

"What did you just say?!"

"Nothing!" Sally cried out, but Lyssa was already grabbing Sally's chin and yanking her forward.

"Do you have the slightest idea of how big of a burden you are?" Lyssa hissed. "You're like leech, Sally, always taking and never giving anything back, and now you've stolen the one thing that *I* wanted the most."

Sally gathered up some saliva in her mouth and spat in her sister's face. Lyssa shoved her so hard back that she slammed into a wall and stars exploded in her vision.

"You ungrateful brat!" Lyssa screeched.

Sally screamed and darted away. There wasn't much space in the room to run, so when Lyssa chased her Sally grabbed the first things that came into view and threw them at her sister. A bottle of perfume was broken against the bed frame; chair overturned and mirror shattered underneath their feet. Sally kicked the guitar out of her way and tried to make a break for the corridor. Lyssa was faster; she caught her at the threshold, writhing and biting back hot tears.

"You can run for all I care," Lyssa snarled, hovering right in front of her face. "But know that I'm not taking you back even if you come to me begging and crying."

With whose words, she let Sally go.

Sally bolted and didn't look back.

The Baroness gave birth to a son, and with that, came many changes.

Their piano lessons became more rare, for one, though it was partly because there was simply nothing to teach Sally anymore. By the age of ten she knew every symphony and song by heart, even those that were scraped down in the Baroness's personal notebook. Sally's fingers danced over the piano keys, and the Baroness would listen to her playing, rocking a cradle gently to the rhythm. A composer and a musician, a noble and a commoner, a strict tutor and a rebellious student – despite all the differences, they were united by the same passionate love for music and instruments that it was created by.

It wasn't all butterflies and flowers. The manor staff spoke more and more often of the Baron's debts, of fortunes drained on a playing table, of porcelain sets and gold-gilded candelabras disappearing as their salaries continued to plummet. Sally heard of it first-hand from Alex; or more saw of it really, when he was called to deal cards at their table and would return with a black eye and a little more darkness gathering behind the unreadable gaze of his.

Even the servants saw how little he mattered after the barony acquired a legitimate heir. It became common for Sally to see Alex's hands beaten bloody and purple with a ruler; one time it had gone to the point he couldn't lift up a spoon without wincing or crying out. Sally would sneak him something to eat from the kitchen, never mentioning how he latched onto the pieces of bread and cheese with the grace of a starving dog. Pride was all he had through it all, and Sally was not so inconsiderate as to take it away.

Through the next few years Alex learned to smile and laugh loudly, but it was always heavy, with too many teeth and too few joys to share. There was so much hatred in his tight-lipped expression whenever he looked at the Baroness's toddler son that sometimes it put Sally on edge. The thing that alarmed her the most, though, was the stark resemblance between him and the way that Alecia looked at her.

"You could start anew, you know," Sally said as they sat on a flat roof one day, a game of cards fanned out in-between them. "Go somewhere far away, where nobody knows who you are and can't look down on you for it."

"Do I look like a coward to you?" Alex asked, his brows furrowing subtly.

"Is it better to suffer in pride than to live as a happy coward?" Sally shot right back.

Alex looked over the courtyard below. From up here, people looked no bigger than apple seeds, and all their worries seemed to be distant and insignificant.

"Y'know, nothing is going to change if I run," he said. "People are the same everywhere. They revel in the little power that they have and see it as a must to torment those who are below them." His eyes darkened in a way that sent goosebumps down Sally's arms. "One day, all the power is going to be mine, and nobody will dare to treat me the way that they do now."

Alex often said things like that; things that were better to stay locked in the confinement of one's own thoughts. Sally supposed it couldn't be helped that his imagination would seek retribution where he himself couldn't. Alex never acted upon those urges though, so she learned not to pay them any mind.

"Sorry to remind you, but last time I checked, you were still a bastard," Sally said, laying down a jack and a king in-between them. "The old baron and your half-brother would kind of get in the way of that."

Alex shrugged, pinning an ace of spades on top of the jack. "I heard that there are mercenaries out there, people who can do the dirty job for you."

"And where would you, pray tell, find the money for a mercenary?" Sally asked.

"Gambling."

"Gambling?"

Alex hummed out an affirmation. "If you can lose a fortune at a playing table, then surely you can win one with it too. And you know what the first rule of any game is?" the boy grinned wider, running his tongue over a missing tooth. "If you cheat, don't get caught."

He flipped his hand, a snake coiled around his wrist like a bracelet. The jester that Sally evidently remembered sliding up the sleeve of her shirt was now clenched in Charlie's fangs. On his head was a tiny top hat that Alex crafted for him the other day. Charlie looked extremely satisfied with himself, passing the jester into Quackity's awaiting fingers.

"You're a scary man, Alexis Quackity," Sally huffed, handing him all of the remaining cards.

Alex froze mid-shuffle, looking at her with narrowed, unblinking eyes. "What did you just call me?"

"You know, like a duck?" Sally prompted. "Ducky. Quack. Quackity."

"Quackity," Alex muttered with a thoughtful glimpse to his eyes, and then flashed her a bright approving grin. "Yeah, I can work with that."

The room that Sally moved in after Lyssa had kicked her out was adjacent to the Baroness's. Even so, it was always Sally coming to see the lady if something was needed and not the other way around. That's why she knew immediately that something was wrong when she found the doors to her room open and the Baroness standing in the middle of it.

"What is this?" Sally knew that tone, and she knew the earring the Baroness was holding, previously hidden in the casing of her pillow. It could've been a random maid that found it, by pure coincidence, but Lyssa's presence behind the Baroness suggested otherwise.

"It's mine," Sally said. "It was a gift from the Empress."

"Liar!" The Baroness hollered. Sally was innocent, but she couldn't help shrinking back. Sometimes the Baroness could be impatient and irritated, but she had never talked like that, not with her.

"It's true!" she exclaimed, some of the frustration seeping into her voice. "Lyssa, tell them, you know that it is!"

But Lyssa kept staring at the ground, as if she was too ashamed to look in Sally's face.

"How would we, simply commoners, acquire something as expensive, if not by unfair means?" she muttered. To Sally, it sounded like a piano key floored in morbid silence.

"You know how!" Sally exploded, lunging at Lyssa with clenched fists. "You know everything and yet you're not telling it!" Someone grabbed and kept her back, but Sally's wrath was stronger; she wanted to wipe that pretense innocence from Lyssa's face, and her lips moved on repeat, "I hate you, I hate you, I fucking hate you—"

A slap landed across Sally's face. She staggered back, holding a hand to her cheek. Sally suffered injuries harder at half her current age, but it hurt much worse because the person who delivered the blow was someone that Sally looked up to and admired.

"*Enough*," the Baroness said. "I've fed you, I've clothed you, I've taken you underneath my wing— and *this* is how you pay me?" She signaled to the guards still holding Sally by both arms. "Thieves have no place underneath my roof."

In six years Sally's life had gone through a full cycle, and now she was back where she had started: on the streets of L'manburg, hunger twisting her stomach into braids.

Alex had seen her off— or he tried, at least, to follow her to the very gate, before he was chased away by the guards. While Sally stood, shell-shocked and drenching in the evening rain, a snake had dropped a couple of gold coins at her feet. Alex had nobody on his side now; Sally felt guilty that she couldn't feel more dismayed by the fact. She was worried for

her friend, but not as much as for herself on that first night where the once familiar town looked so cold and sinister.

In the following weeks, she took every job that needed a pair of strong arms and could buy her a warm dinner. It was fortunate that it never really was cold in this town, or else she would've frozen to death on the roofs and sheds she chose for a shelter. Sally fought tooth and nail for every piece of clothing in the bundle behind her shoulders and sent more robbers running than she bothered to count. She learned to speak loudly, to appear fearless, to look and act in a way that would keep people away from her. Those no longer were the childhood games she remembered fondly; this was fight for survival in its purest form.

But not even the constant state of hunger and fear was what troubled Sally the most, but how the hatred in her heart would grow weak whenever she imagined living the same life with somebody to care for. There had been an option for Lyssa to leave Sally at the steps of one of many orphanages opened at the Empress' mercy. Instead Lyssa chose to raise her, give her all those happy memories – only to abandon her and make them into tools to torment her with.

By the end of the year Sally grew numb to thinking about her Lyssa. When a city guard came knocking on the door of a room she had been renting, she nearly bashed their face in with a piece of rusty pipe. It took more time to remember that yes, Sally had a sister, than to process the fact that they needed her to identify a dead body.

Bandit groups are getting bolder, they said. *An unsafe road, too little guards*. Staring at a carnage of bloody corpses – her sister's and the Baroness's among them – Sally asked herself if she could have prevented it.

The old baron had died the next day. Whether from grief or something more than just alcohol in his morning glass of wine, nobody bothered to check. The dutiful and loyal son he was, Baron Alexis Quackity – the Bastard Baron, as they whispered on the streets – took his place. Suddenly Sally inherited a house in the middle of the town from a relative that she had never heard of before, along with an old guitar and unmarked box. Inside, resting on a tiny velvet cushion, was a pair of diamond earrings.

Sally wasn't sure whether Quackity had been paying her back for their friendship or for her silence, she wasn't sure in anything, wasn't even sure whether she had ever known the true Alex at all. Execution or imprisonment of her childhood friend wasn't going to bring Lyssa back, and the truth of her death mattered to nobody but Sally herself. One day she might get to the bottom of it, but not today, not anytime soon.

Life went on.

Sally bought herself a few chickens, some seeds to get a small garden going, furnished one bedroom more than needed for just herself and put the guitar there. Having a piano in the house would remind her too much of the past, but she was content enough to be playing on parties and tutoring noble kids – content enough to dedicate six years to that small, quiet existence.

Life went on.

That night something woke Sally up before dawn. She was in the town market by the time that the sun started going up, greeting the fishermen laying out their morning catch, when they heard it – the dreadful toll of bells, slow like the realization of their meaning, and just as damning.

Even news like this traveled to the borders long. L'manburg had been among the last ones to hear two full sunrises after the Empress had passed away. Like in a dream, Sally watched black flags lowered from every tower, doors opening and people freezing up on thresholds, everything alive pausing its existence to acknowledge that someone no longer was. She returned home without saying a word to other sunken gloomy faces, grabbed the box hidden underneath a loose plank in her bedroom, and went to a nearby beach.

The wooden pier croaked and cried underneath Sally's feet; she ignored it and soldiered on, eyes on the horizon, until the ocean was rumbling just underneath her feet and spraying her bare toes. Like salt in the morning breeze, the old memories were simmering in the air. Sally stood there, and just breathed.

And then it caught on. Years of living in forceful oblivion of indifference, of trying to forget and move on, all at once came over her. Sally clenched the earrings in her fist so hard that they hurt her palm, and tossed towards where the horizon met the ocean. The waves lapped up the diamond tears, and then the ones that spilled in hot rivers down her face.

Relief flooded her. Sally felt weightless, as if she hadn't just got rid of a pair of rocks but of a rusty anchor along with the whole damn ship. *Live!* The sky told her, clearing. *Live*, whispered the clouds and the heads of gentle cornflowers swaying in the wind. Life went on, and Sally intended not to waste another second of it.

Sally stepped off the pier and noticed something dark heaped on white sand. Curious, she inched up for a closer look at what turned out to be an abandoned jacket. The fabric felt damp and crusty, like fresh out of the sea, when she picked it and rubbed it in-between her fingers. Dropped by somebody at the port, maybe?

Sally looked up and stiffened.

Another big wave came and went, leaving an unconscious body behind.

End Notes

Apologies for any misspells, I just finished writing this and I'm simply blind to any typos.

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